

Why big-ticket war machines are still crucial

Ong Wei Chong,
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The designate British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir David Richards, recently remarked at a conference: The British armed forces are adapting to the challenges of war in Afghanistan.

Gen Richards was suggesting that big-ticket combat systems such as submarines, stealth fighters and major surface combatants simply do not perform well against opponents that fight asymmetrically with sophisticated off-the-shelf technology.

The strategic realities of today and the future are reflected in Afghanistan - the army taking the lead in 'clear, hold and build' operations supported by the navy and the air force.

Also, the pace of technological change has left every nation's mainstream procurement process struggling to deliver equipment that will remain relevant against more agile opponents satisfied with cheap and ever-evolving '80 per cent solutions'.

Gen Richards raised issues that resonate with a Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) that is currently transforming itself into a 3G force able to respond to an amorphous and unpredictable battlespace. This may include war fighting; security, stability, transition and reconstruction (SSTR); and humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) scenarios.

Considering Singapore's resource constraints - particularly limited manpower and the need to channel ever more resources to social development - the SAF cannot expect to perform equally well across the entire spectrum of operations.

It must prioritise the investment of its resources depending on how it answers two questions.

First, are conflicts with transnational, violent, non-state actors a historical aberration or long-term strategic trend? Second, do we believe that, despite globalisation, inter-state war remains a possibility, and if so, has it manifested itself differently?

If the increased participation of the SAF in international SSTR and HADR operations in recent years is anything to go by, it indicates that the security challenges confronting Singapore today and in the near future will be primarily transnational and 'non-traditional' in nature.

Moreover, 9/11 and the protracted insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that conventional combat power does not deter highly determined non-state violent actors that fight asymmetrically.

In the light of such developments, is the SAF's recent acquisition of technologically advanced combat platforms such as the Archer class submarines, Formidable class stealth frigates, G550 Conformal Airborne Early Warning aircraft and F-15SG fighters a waste of public funds?

Are these costly legacy systems built for yesterday's wars but ill-suited for the security needs of 21st century Singapore?

Tempting as it might be to answer with a resounding yes, the uncertainty of the post-Cold War security environment precludes such a response.

We are constantly reminded of the salience of the 'non-state' and the 'non-traditional'. But we must also remember that the international community largely operates within the traditional system of sovereign states. This system of sovereign states, however increasingly interdependent, is not without a finite risk of conflict.

Despite the economic downturn, global military spending reached a record US\$1.46 trillion (S\$2.1 trillion) last year - a 4 per cent increase from 2007. This increase might not represent any hostile intent from any particular state, but lamentable as it might seem, the vast majority of sovereign states do prepare for the possibility of inter-state war.

Thus, despite the end of the Cold War, the strategic reality remains that 'freedom from all fear of coercion', be it from states or violent non-state actors, is still very much elusive.

If so, being the ultimate guarantor of Singapore's peace, security and sovereignty, SAF must ensure its character and role are constantly (re)defined by such strategic realities if it is to remain relevant.

The writer is an associate research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University.